



## DR. L. H. BUNNELL

### *and the Naming of Yosemite Valley*

A Medical Footnote to California History

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A CENTURY AGO, the first state park was created on June 30, 1864, when war-worried President Lincoln signed a bill that granted to California what is now Yosemite National Park. Since a doctor of medicine was present at its discovery and he chose its name, it is appropriate for a new generation of California physicians to recall Dr. L. H. Bunnell.

"Moral, political and financial night" was the characterization given California of the 1850's by H. H. Bancroft,<sup>1</sup> the noted historian. The sinful Indian War was going great guns. When James D. Savage's stores in Mariposa and Fresno were raided, a storekeeper killed and nearby a miner found dead and minus most of his skin, the owner appealed to the governor for arms to form the Mariposa Battalion. Savage was promptly elected major. Meanwhile, the Indian commissioners had curtailed much of the hostilities by negotiating treaties with all the nearby tribes, except the Yosemite Indians. This tribe was a gang of malcontents bound together not by blood or marriage but only by their own lawlessness.

The Mariposa Battalion consisted of adventurous volunteers, many of whom had served in the Mexican War a few years before. One of these veterans was a young physician named Lafayette Houghton Bunnell. He differed from his fellows in one major

respect: he was singularly entranced by the magnificence of the Sierra. In March of 1851, when Major Savage marched his men over the mountains that protected the Yosemite Indians, the first white men entered the valley. Here is an account written by Dr. Bunnell, published in 1865 in James Hutchings' *Scenes of Wonder and Curiosity in California*<sup>3</sup>:

"It is acknowledged that Ah-wah-ne is the old Indian name for the valley, and that Ah-wah-ne-chee is the name of its original occupants; but this was discovered by the writer long after he had named the valley, and it was the wish of every volunteer with whom he conversed that the name of Yo-Semity be retained."

In 1880 Dr. Bunnell expanded this account in his book, *The Discovery of the Yosemite and the Indian War of 1851*<sup>2</sup>:

"I suggested that the valley should have an appropriate name . . . I did not like any of the names proposed and suggested that it would be better to give the valley an Indian name than to import a strange and inexpressive one; and that the name of the tribe who occupied it would be more appropriate than any which I had heard suggested. I then proposed that we give the valley the name of Yosemite, that to be doing so the name of the tribe of Indians which we met leaving their homes in the valley, perhaps never to return, would be perpetu-

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ated . . . At the time its significance—grizzly bear—was not generally known to our battalion. Neither was it pronounced with uniformity. Savage, who could speak the dialects of most of the mountain tribes in this part of California, told us that the correct pronunciation was Yo-semity, and that it signified a full-grown grizzly; and that the name was given to old Tenieya's band because of their lawless and predatory character.

"The date of our discovery and entrance into the Yosemite Valley was about the 21st of March, 1851 . . .

"Lieutenant Moore, of the U.S.A., in his report of an expedition to the valley in 1852, substituted *e* as the terminal letter, in place of the *y* in use by us; no doubt thinking the use of the *e* more scholarly, or perhaps supposing Yosemite to be of Spanish derivation."

After the Mariposa Battalion was disbanded July 25, 1851, Dr. Bunnell remained in California for five years, trading and mining. He then returned to La Crosse, Michigan, where he enlisted in the Union Army, serving as a hospital steward and rising to

army surgeon. Bunnell's medical training was not unusual for the place and times. When he was 16, he had reluctantly begun to study medicine in his father's office. A later precepteeship (with a Dr. Scovill of Detroit) was interrupted by a hitch in the Mexican War, where he soon found himself in charge of the regimental hospital. In 1864, he received an honorary M.D. from the La Crosse Medical College, based apparently on his military medical services. He practiced for some years in Homer, Minnesota. He died in 1903 in Winona, Minnesota.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, no area in Yosemite National Park commemorates the name of Dr. Bunnell.

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#### REFERENCES

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